BUILDING INSTRUCTOR INVOLEMENT IN A DISTANCE-LEARNING SETTING

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Annotation. *Distance learning (DL) is rapidly increasingly in education worldwide. DL courses are asynchronous; therefore, many students perceive them as disengaged and impersonal. DL instructors can dispel these perceptions by overseeing every aspect of student participation in the classroom. To help instructors develop DL pedagogies that compensate for the lack of face to face (f2f) interaction, this paper offers conceptual and practice advice about developing course content and teaching styles; these guidelines will support teachers who increasingly instructing in the virtual classroom and maximize student learning in that environment.*

Distance learning (DL) education is increasingly in popularity in higher education arenas. In the United States of America, for example, in 2007–08, about 4.3 million undergraduate students, or 20 percent of all undergraduates, took at least one distance education course. About 0.8 million, or 4 percent of all undergraduates, took their entire program through distance education. The percentage of undergraduates who took any distance education courses rose from 16 percent in 2003–04 to 20 percent in 2007–08[1]. As individual course, computer was the most popular at 27 % [2].

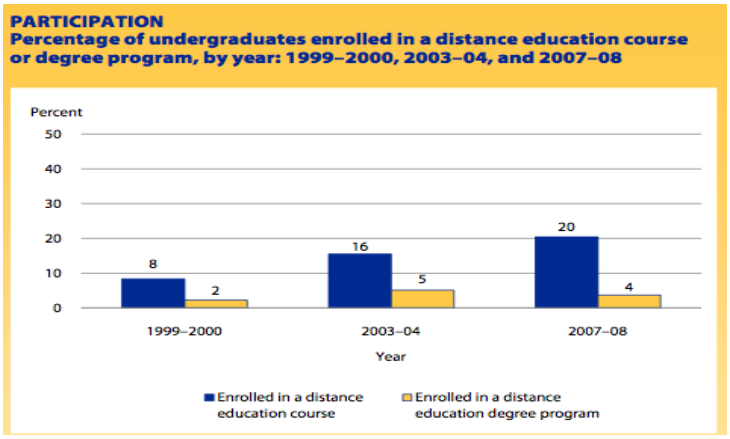

Figure 1, Courtesy of Radford, p.4 [2]

The consistent increase in DL education prompts universities, departments, and individual teachers to develop their pedagogical skills, especially since most instructors are inexperienced in this pedagogy. Achieving the appropriate level of instructor engagement is critical to running a pedagogically sound DL course. Because DL courses are asynchronous, many students perceive them as detached and impersonal. To assuage student anxieties and dismiss these misconceptions, instructors must oversee myriad aspects of student participation in the classroom. Such online learning pedagogy requires a different skill set, presence, and pedagogy on the part of the teacher than traditional f2f instruction [3]. When instructors develop course content and policies, they should consider the following practices:

- Develop consistent "in class" schedules; teachers are available to answer questions or emails at strictly designated and applied times, thus creating a consistent teacher "presence" for students [4].

- Use real-time applications offered by online educational platforms; real-time conferences technology can eliminate asynchronous barriers: students can ask questions and receive immediate responses. Although students cannot experience the instructor's body language first-hand, hearing the instructor's voice or seeing facial expressions provides a sense of physicality that discussion boards cannot supply [5].
- Require participation in discussion boards; some students enroll in DL courses because of their schedules. Using this tool allows students to interact with peers on their own schedules [4]. For independent students instructors can employ discussion boards to answer frequently asked questions [6]. Open discussion boards encourage students to interact with each other, but such work should be required, to ensure participation.
- Hold workshops; workshopping requiring students to edit and or comment on each other's papers and also presents the instructor with an opportunity to directly give her students feedback. This practice encourages students to interact and develop a sense of classroom [3].
- Update assignments weekly; it is essential that teachers maintain consistency and facilitate transparent pedagogy in this asynchronous by appraising students about class assignments regularly, which will also promote an instructor's engagement in class.
- Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL); "UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn" [7] because it is flexible yet consistent pedagogical.
    - Affect, Engagement, and Motivation: UDL approaches reduce negative emotional experiences in school and increase positive ones to support greater student effort, persistence, and engagement.
    - Executive Function, Organization, Attention, and Working Memory: UDL provides students with organizational support in challenging learning situations or environments.
    - Supports and Scaffolds in UDL: Supports learning, especially when it is computer-based..
    - Learning Analytics and Progress Monitoring: Explores how individual student performance data accrued in digital environments can be used to deliver feedback and recommend interventions in "real time" to students, teachers, and administrators.
    - Authoring Platforms: Enables educators and others to create their own feature-rich curriculum materials based on UDL principles.
    - UDL in Literacy, Science and Math: UDL-based, media-rich learning environments built to teach and learning particular content and skills, including projects that address the needs of specific disability population.
    - Smart Images: Uses interactive, digital images that offer alternatives to print as a means of learning and encourage active, exploratory learning.
    - Online Learning: Makes online learning more accessible and effective for all learners.[1]

Three primary principles guide UDL

I. Provide Multiple Means of Representation	II. Provide Multiple Means of Action and Expression	III. Provide Multiple Means of Engagement
Perception	Physical action	Recruiting interest
Language, expressions, and symbols	Expression and communication	Sustaining effort and persistence
Comprehension	Executive function	Self-regulation [adapted from 1]

Figure 2

DL instructors must also develop their pedagogical styles for the digital asynchronous environment, an environment which does not inherently include physical and verbal interaction between student and teacher. Teachers should stay true to their personal pedagogical person. But, they must also seek balance between the extremes of various online personas. The "unapproachable sage'" intimidates; the "apathetic drone" bores; the "friend" earn no respect; the "fool" loses credibility; and the "harsh critic" is often not helpful [8].

In developing their classroom presence, DL instructors should also model the lessons they offer, especially those involving timeliness and accuracy. Warnock claims he writes roughly 30,000 words per semester in one online classroom [8]; imagine the effects of sloppiness. Although such pedagogy is not necessarily intuitive, especially to teachers comfortable in the traditional classroom, instructors can develop effective DL pedagogy that compensates for the lack of (f2f) interaction in the online environment. Using these guidelines will help to maximize student learning and to accommodate teachers' own style to the virtual classroom.

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